

Prison Survival



Prisoner Support

Contacts

Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Network

Support those imprisoned for actions in defence of the earth and its inhabitants.
BM Box 2407, London WC1N 3XX, www.geocities.com/earthlibprisoner
animalearthliberation@bigfoot.com

Brighton Anarchist Black Cross

Support class struggle and anarchist prisoners.
PO Box 74, Brighton, BN1 4ZQ, UK. mail@brightonabc.org.uk
www.brightonabc.org.uk

Bristol Anarchist Black Cross

c/o Kebele, 14 Robertson Rd, Easton, Bristol, BS5 6JY, UK. bristol_abc@yahoo.co.uk
www.geocities.com/bristol_abc

Class War Prisoners

Classwaruk@hotmail.com

Animal Liberation Front Supporters Group

Support animal liberation prisoners and other ALF activities.
BCM 1160, London WC1N 3XX

Vegan Prisoner Support Group

PO Box 194, Enfield, Middlesex EN1 4YL 020 82 92 83 25
hvpc@vpsg.freemove.co.uk www.cares.demon.co.uk/vpsg

Prisoners Advice Service

Offer advice & information by legal professionals to prisoners, particularly concerning prisoners' rights and prison rules. Take up prisoners' complaints about their treatment by the prison system.
Unit 210, Hatton Square. 16 - 16a Baldwins Gardens, EC1N 7RJ 020 7405 8090
www.prisonersadvice.org.uk pas@tinyworld.co.uk

Haven Distribution

An anarchist project providing free books to prisoners.
BM Haven, London WC1N 3XX

Women in Prison

Charity offering support and advice to women prisoners.
22 Highbury Grove, London, N5 2EA admin@womeninprison.org.uk

Justice for Mark Barnsley Campaign

Mark is out of jail on license but the campaign continues, to overturn his conviction and with it the constant risk of re-imprisonment. Currently raising money for legal appeal.
PO Box 381, Huddersfield, HD1 3XX www.freemarkbarnsley.com

Freedom and Justice for Samar and Jawad

BM Box FOSA, London, WC1N 3XX postmaster@freesaj.org.uk www.freesaj.org.uk

Free and Critter Legal Defense Fund

Raising money for legal appeals.
PO Box 11922, Eugene, OR 97440, USA

Introduction

The aim I had in publishing this pamphlet was to bring together various pieces of writing which would be of practical help to those facing prison and for those wanting to provide support for friends inside.

Section 1 consists of pieces written by prisoners and ex-prisoners about their experiences inside. I asked them to write anything which they thought would be useful for someone facing prison for the first time, and these articles are what I was sent in response. Some of the contributors served or are serving sentences of up to 20 years while others were inside for as little as a couple of weeks. Their experiences vary, as does what they have written - some focusing on describing prison life, others on emotional strategies for survival, others on useful hints or tips.

I made it clear when asking for contributions that I was not trying to compile a list of specific prison procedures and regulations. These vary over time and from prison to prison and inevitably I would have ended up publishing inaccurate and out of date information.

Information about prison regulations, prisoners rights and so on can be obtained from the Prisoners Advice Service at the address on page 32. Where such details are given in this pamphlet they should be taken as no more than a part of the individual writer's experience.

I hope that these writings will help to lessen the 'fear of the unknown' which surrounds prison. If you think that you might get sent down one day, or if you know you will, then the more you know about the subject in advance the more you can mentally prepare for it. I think it can also help just to hear from someone who has been there before. I find that unpleasant and dangerous situations are always easier to deal with when there's someone else in them with me.

The second section of this pamphlet deals with prisoner support. All these pieces are written by prisoners and those involved in prisoner support work. Most of this section consists of writing which gives some ideas of what action can be taken in support of prisoners, but I have also included some accounts, by prisoners, which I think illustrate how important and effective solidarity from the outside can be.

With the exception of the Rob Thaxton / Free interview on

page 32, all the contributions to this pamphlet are from people in England. This is not because I don't think a lot of worthwhile stuff on the subject has come out of other countries, but because I wanted to limit the scope of the pamphlet to what would be most directly relevant to its readership, and keep it simple to produce. I can also think of many people who I could have asked to contribute but didn't. Who I asked and who I didn't was down to little more than chance and, while I do not want this to be an on-going project of mine, there is no reason why similar publications should not be produced by other people which could include their own or other people's work.

Unless otherwise indicated, all the illustrations were provided by people in prison.

The cost of this booklet has been set to cover the costs of printing and distribution. In the unlikely event that it ends up making a profit, all the money will be donated to one or more of the support groups or campaigns listed in the contacts list on page 32.

The opinions expressed in this booklet are those of the individual contributors. Within the boundaries of being pro-prisoner support, I have not selected the articles to push any one agenda, nor do I necessarily agree with everything in them.

It is a sad fact that in recent years many activists who have been imprisoned have received little or no practical support from those outside. As revolutionaries we need to create a culture of mutual aid where we provide support for each other, and where everyone knows that solidarity is guaranteed for them when they need it. Nowhere is this more important than in supporting fellow activists who end up in jail. This pamphlet is a part of that ongoing process.

This is taken from an interview between Rob Thaxton and Jeffrey 'Free' Luerš, both serving time in the US, for anti-capitalist and Earth Liberation activities respectively.

ROB: I'm sort of underwhelmed with the support I've gotten so far. I'm not gonna knock anyone, though our movement - such as it is - doesn't have a lot of experience with real oppression, so most of our lip service supporters are at a loss as to what to do, other than send reading material and money. And I sincerely appreciate having that sort of support. Still, I would like to be more involved with what's happening out there beyond those big, gray walls. As far as being the subject of graffiti, hey - what red-blooded, rock-slinging, cop-assaulting, rioting anarchist wouldn't be honored by that?

It's totally understandable that folks out there don't know how to help out, considering all the petty rules prisoncrats arbitrarily throw up to discourage and limit access between us and the outside world. It takes a lot of time and effort to be involved with prisoners as allies and comrades. Being friends - pen pals, even - is much easier and the people who've been writing for a while have made a lot of difference to my time in here. I can't imagine how I'd have managed so far without them. Other than contacts and friends I had from my previous existence, all these folks got my contact information from zines or prisoner listings on the internet.

So, I enjoy the attention, but I'd like to feel like I'm still part of the struggle, instead of a fallen martyr.

What are some of the ways you think people could help us out more? All the ideas I have would take a lot of resources and effort, more effort than one or two people could be expected to do. How about you?

FREE: Well, some of the obvious things that come to mind are writing the governor. It might not seem like much, but there is always the possibility it can help us legally. If nothing else, it shows we have support and that makes it less likely we'll get fucked with.

Second, stop treating us like a cause. We're human beings and not abstract enemies. A lot of people have gone on, without my consent, to speak on my behalf, to claim to represent me. That really disturbs me - that is the exact process/system/attitude I struggle against. If you really want to get involved, contact me. Talk to me about what I want, what you can do to help. If you don't want to get involved, but want to show a level of support - write letters. It may be hard to believe, but very few people actually continue a correspondence. I'd really like to form new friendships.

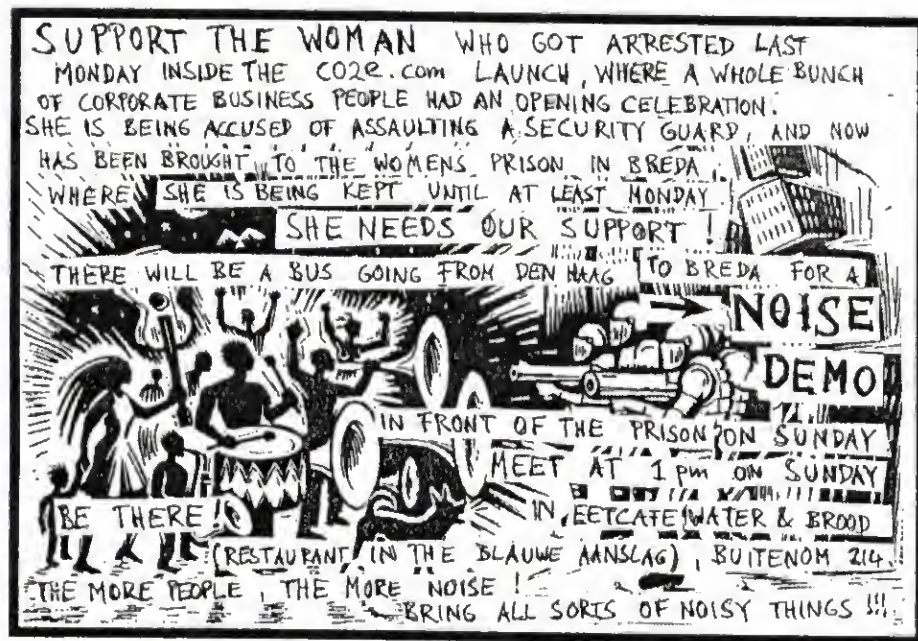
We are in here as an example, our sentences are meant to be a deterrent to dissent. Actions of solidarity show them that the voice of revolution will not be silenced because a few of us have fallen. We must continue to increase the pressure on all fronts. The continuation of the struggle is the greatest form of support, because it gives us hope that one day there will no longer be a corrupt, oppressive power to keep us behind these walls.

While there are so many ways to support us, and I can't possibly write or even think of them all, a combination of all the above would be so awesome.

prison was just one of many: whether it was schools, jobs, depression, economies, nation states. And inside were inspiring people who were also fucked off and hadn't been afraid to express it, even if rebellion is often encouraged to find a self-destructive route.

The piece de resistance came on my final night. I knew it was coming but when it arrived I was still dumbfounded that people had gone to the trouble. And I tried to tell as many people inside as possible what was happening so they would know what it was and that it was for everyone inside, not just for me. The noise demo lasted for an hour and a half, and I banged along to the ever more sophisticated rhythms being played out on dustbin lids and saucepans so hard that I broke my window! From my cell, I could see orange and pink explosions and hear the songs and cacophony. It was brilliant.

— My experience was unique because it was during a protest when lots of people were active, around, and motivated. This isn't always or usually the case. Prison support for political and "non-political" prisoners and finding ways to attack the prison industry from within and without (although this boundary is about to get blurred with the increase in electronic tagging which could be said to take the person out of the prison and put the prison in the person) is one of the most important things we do. To have your freedom taken away from you in a moment is a terrifying thing, but it was also for me, because brief and in the context so well supported, an incredibly empowering experience.



Section 1

Experiences of imprisonment

Preparing for Prison – The View from Inside

Imprisonment as a form of punishment can be traced back to Greek times, but until relatively recently long-term incarceration was extremely rare, only flourishing in modern times after transportation to 'the colonies' became unviable (in no small part due to the American Revolution). Traditionally, those that offended against society were punished publicly, generally in the most brutal way, from the stocks to the gibbet. Public executions, often with attendant torture and/or mutilation, were the norm in this country until the 17th century. Even when they were abolished it was not out of any sense of decency or humanity, but according to the Oxford History of the Prison, because they had "become the occasion of rowdiness and disgust – both because the crowd had begun to identify with the victim, not the executioner, and because the spectacle had become revolting, offending a new sensibility about pain and bodily integrity. Thus, it became desirable to mete out punishment away from the public gaze."

Today, prison is still very much a closed world, and while within the past two decades TV cameras have occasionally been able to show a very limited view of life behind bars, they rarely capture anything more than that which the authorities wish them to see. The true misery of imprisonment is deliberately kept secret from the general public, while the right-wing press and unscrupulous politicians conspire to present a picture of cushy 'holiday camps' and 'health farms'. The prison authorities do everything within their power (legal and illegal) to prevent investigative journalists having contact with prisoners and vice-versa, while Michael Howard and Jack Straw imposed a ban preventing visiting journalists reporting anything at all. Though the ban has subsequently been deemed unlawful, the vast majority of journalists are so lazy, cowardly, and/or clueless that it might as well still be in place.

With the British prison population currently growing at a rate of four hundred a week, and New Labour's Draconian policies criminalising dissent, as a political activist it is more likely that you will see the inside of a prison cell than at any time in recent history. For those committed to the overthrow of the State, imprisonment has to be seen as an occupational hazard, and as such it's better to consider it beforehand, rather than when it's too late.

During my life I've spent time in over 20 British prisons (plus at least a dozen more I've visited or 'stopped over' at), that includes local prisons, remand centres, long-term Category B prisons, all Britain's maximum security dispersal prisons, a couple of Category A units and 16 segregation units. I've been around a bit, but I've never been anywhere near a low security or 'open' prison, and though I correspond with a number of women prisoners, I've obviously never been held in a women's prison. So while I think I'm pretty well qualified to talk about the prison experience, there are limits to what I know, and inevitably this piece reflects that.

If you know you're going to be imprisoned, at least that gives you a headstart. Maybe you can even talk to someone who's been in your local nick, and who knows the rules and can give you an idea what to expect. The 'unknown' is the scariest thing of all, isn't it? Prison is the worst thing our society has.

The most common fear, certainly among men, seems to be that if they get locked up they'll have to go in the showers with Mr. Big. Forget that, predatory homosexuality is as rare in British prisons as malt whisky, in fact in some prisons it's a great deal rarer. There's probably more chance of you being raped or sexually assaulted 'outside' than in here. I have never actually come across a single occurrence.

Then there's the fear of non-sexual violence, are you going to be locked up with a load of thugs and psychopaths who'll cut your throat as soon as look at you?

Again, this is largely exaggerated, but violence does exist in prison. However, it's a relatively simple matter to minimise the likelihood of being attacked, in my experience there's far less random violence in prison than in wider society. I was in an adult long-term prison at 19, and the only time I've been attacked it's been by the screws.

Slaying safe comes down to basics, stay alert and learn some manners, prison is a close environment containing too many people, so manners are extra important. Be polite to people, treat them with mutual respect, don't be nosy or

impinge on their limited personal space, never borrow things without asking, don't boast or bullshit, never grass anyone up, and even more importantly, avoid drugs (heroin) and stay away from junkies. When I was at Full Sutton in 1996, there was an average of one stabbing a week, but almost all of them were related to smack.

While adult prisons, particularly long-term ones, tend to be a fairly mature environment, 'Young Offenders Institutions' (for those under 21) can be different, and violence less easy to avoid. The general advice still applies though, be assertive not aggressive, but don't let people take liberties with you, and if necessary be prepared to fight. Some self-defence training may give you an edge, but be warned that prison fights are always dirty, you can expect to be bitten, scalded, stabbed, coshed, and/or attacked by multiple assailants. Attacks are likely to take place in the showers or when the victim is still in bed.

In reality it's not other prisoners you should be worried about, they will become your friends and comrades, in the harsh prison environment bonds will be forged that can last a lifetime. Your problems will come from the system, and from the screws, particularly if you're a person of integrity. From the very first moment you enter prison your principles, your sense of selfhood, and your very humanity will be under attack. If you are to survive unbroken, you must resist all attempts to turn you into a numbered, subjugated, compliant piece of jail-fodder, a 'Stepford Prisoner' whose had their spine and brain removed. You are after all not just an individual, but a member of a movement, and those that come after you will be judged by how you yourself behave.

Unfortunately, for those of you entering prison today, the level of political consciousness among British prisoners is at the lowest point for many years. Divide and rule scams like the loathsome 'Incentives and Earned Privileges' scheme have undermined solidarity, and in-cell TVs and heroin have helped a

This article was originally going to be in section 1 but I have included it here because it shows very clearly the importance of prisoner support, and the positive effect that it, and the continuation of the struggle, can have on the prisoner.

An incredibly empowering experience

I wrote a rant in prison. It was the kind of piece you write when you're about to get sent down for blowing something up, not for allegedly causing the equivalent of a shaving cut on a security guard's face with a champagne glass during a scuffle! But hey, I was feeling dramatic - it being my first time in jail, and more than that now, it reminds me how powerful, supported and politically clear I felt while I was inside.

I was arrested at the start of protests attempting to shut down the Climate Change Conference in November 2001 during an action at the launch of CO2e.com, a carbon emissions trading company. The first three days in police holding cells were pretty terrible. I saw the friend I had been arrested with released (no more duets of "You're scum and you know you are" hummed - because we didn't want them to know we were English, at the guards into the night!) and many others come and go. After being told I was fucked and being charged with assault by cops who'd obviously learnt their English from some cheesy American action movies ("Ah, I see you are hard, you are very hard"), I didn't hear anything for two days and received only a vacuous dinner party novel and the memoirs of a pacifist anarcho-syndicalist, literary choices I cannot imagine any of my friends committing!

On Thursday, I was taken to the judge who said I was to be jailed at least until the following Monday when the protests would be over. I was devastated. I knew everyone was outside and all I wanted to do was hug my mates and get caned at one of the squat bars. But I was going to prison. I'd been thinking about it all summer. Wondering what it would be like, wondering whether I could handle it. I cried when I left the judge, and I cried in prison too, but one of the most extraordinary weeks of my life had begun. Even though they took me to Breda Detention Centre, 80 miles away from Den Haag, inspiring letters of support, a noise demo and my amazing friends all eventually found their way to me.

I was locked up for 22 hours a day in a solitary cell with a TV, a loaf of bread, chocolate sprinkles and a toilet. In the police holding cells, I had found a cartoon of one Smurf pieing another Smurf and had stuck it to the wall with peanut butter. And one of the first things I saw when I turned on the TV was someone pieing the US delegate and footage of the storming of the Conference Centre. Frustrated at not being part of it, nonetheless there was a feeling of strength because even if they'd banged me up, so many others were outside doing what I would otherwise be doing - continuing to act against the Climate Conference, against the state, against the cops on the street and the cops in our heads. This

Compared to many forms of activism prisoner solidarity can often seem at a first glance to be quite tame and ineffective, weird even. It can seem strange to write to someone you don't know, pointless to bang drums outside a prison watched by no-one but the screws and a few visitors, or write to prison governors asking for a change in a prisoner's treatment. Certainly most activism that many of us are involved in is far more militant and exciting than this. Many of us have sound political reasons why we would never write to our MP's or go on a demonstration about something when we could just as easily, and with far more effect, occupy an office, break a window or pull up a crop. It may be that this is one of the reasons that prisoner support is so often neglected.

What must be remembered is that different tactics work well in different situations, and in the restrictive and isolating context of prison, very small acts can have a large effect. Receiving a letter can be the high point of a prisoners day, while writing to a prison governor can lead to a prisoner receiving better treatment. A simple demonstration outside a prison, or occupation of a related target could have an even greater effect.

All of this is not to say that more militant actions have no place in prisoner support activity. On the contrary I think they are essential. Sabotage of companies using prison labour, harassment and home visits to offending governors and screws, and any other effective action against relevant targets should be carried out in support of those behind bars, as and when the need arises. In between times though, the more mundane, but also more accessible and equally important, work of fundraising, letter writing, pickets and noise demos needs to be continued and increased.

"When writing to prisoners, supporters or friends should always try and make letters as positive as possible, there is nothing more soul destroying than negative letters. Also enclose a S.A.E. If you want a reply it helps prisoners to conserve valuable funds. When writing to animal rights prisoners or other political prisoners do not write anything that may be incriminating (obviously) or which could be seen as incitement as you do the prisoner or yourself no favours.

We had excellent support from people outside. I would say to people who are supporting a prisoner that a letter no matter how mundane can make a big difference to your day."

Mel. Animal Rights prisoner serving 6 months.

Send bright cards or funny ones. Yellow and red really cheered up the wall of my cell. If possible arrange a specific time a prisoner can call you. I found it so frustrating and expensive always getting answer phones.

Before going to jail, arrange for a person on the outside to be able to send on letters as some jails restrict access to stamps. I used to write a load of letters, send them all to a friend with the addresses, and he'd put stamps on them and send them on.

Jenny. Peace prisoner serving 4 months

culture of selfishness to develop. You will hear people come out with things like, "I can't afford to get involved" or "I've done my bit" or "I just want to get out." Ignore these wankers, they're just trying to justify their own cowardice.

Everybody wants to get out of these rotten places, but how do you want to get out, on your feet or on your knees? Resistance and solidarity will always exist within prisons, and if you have anything about you at all, your place is with that resistance, not with the grovellers and forelock-tuggers who shit on their fellow cons in the foolish belief that they can make a comfortable life for themselves in here.

Prison Receptions, the entry point into any jail (unless you go straight to the block), have changed a lot since the days when you were very likely to be met with a beating, but they are still inevitably an unpleasant experience. It is here that your prison file will be opened, that you will be given a number, where strangers will begin to address you by your surname only, where others will decide what clothes you can wear and what possessions you can have, and where you will receive your first strip-search. It is in Reception that the battle begins.

The first Prison Reception I was ever in was at Canterbury in 1980. There were certainly worse places back then, but there were still some vicious screws working there. In every nick in the country they used to read you a little speech at Reception, part of which went, "You will call all prison officers 'Sir'." So it didn't take long for my first confrontation to come, I would not, and will not, be forced to call anyone 'Sir'. Nor was I prepared to substitute 'boss' or 'guv'nor' as was acceptable in some prisons. Like a lot of principles it's ostensibly a small thing, it would be so easy to compromise, especially when almost everyone else does, but what are we without principles? Once you start abandoning them for the sake of convenience, who's to say where it will end? I remember a few years ago when I was forced onto a blanket protest at Durham. Having failed to intimidate and bully me into putting on the prison clothes, the screws tried persuasion, "You're alone down here in the block, away from your mates, nobody will even know you've put them on." But I'd have known, and the screws would have known, and that was enough.

Today there's no longer an obligation to call your captors 'Sir', and many nicks no longer require you to wear prison clothes, but your integrity will still be tested, and you will have to struggle to retain it. Relinquish it, and I imagine prison will have far more of a lasting effect on you than if you spend the whole of your sentence in the block.

Screws often behave like playground bullies, when you come into a new nick, they'll try it on to see how much they can get away with. A classic example is to try to get you to 'squat' or bend over during a strip-search - tell them to fuck off.

Every prison has its own rules about what you can and can't have, and they change constantly, but if you know you're getting sent down you can still try to be prepared. Often, little can be sent in after you're imprisoned, so have anything you need and might be able to have with you. Most prisons allow you to wear your own training shoes these days, so get yourself a good sturdy pair. Prisoners generally wear sports clothes, which are easily cared for, avoid black and dark blue colours which aren't always allowed, and go for cotton fabrics that will survive the prison laundry. A radio or small stereo will be useful, as will one or

two books, and some basic stationery. A watch is more or less essential, ideally get one that doesn't require batteries, is tough and waterproof (so you can wear it in the shower), but not unduly expensive or ostentatious. While highly desirable, food and drink and toiletries won't be allowed. If you smoke (and it's a big advantage not to), you may be permitted to keep a small amount of tobacco. Make sure you have cash with you, so that you can buy phonecards and other items you need from the prison shop.

There was a time when every cell contained a copy of the prison rules, and prisoners were required to read them. Now the prison authorities generally do their best to keep them secret, because they are so regularly broken. You will find it useful to consult the Prison Rules and Standing Orders, which outline your few rights and entitlements, and they should be available in the prison library. The Prison Service also publishes its own information booklets, but the contents are very selective. If you have difficulty getting hold of a copy of the rules, or think you are not getting what you're entitled to, as regards diet or exercise for example, either contact your solicitor or the Prisoners Advice Service at the address given on page 32. Prisoners' letters are generally censored, and so have to be handed in or posted with the envelopes unsealed. However, you may write to a solicitor or the Prisoners Advice Service in confidence under Prison Rule 39. Contrary to what you may be told, you do not have to allow a member of staff to seal the envelope for you, and if you do not have stamps you can ask for a 'Special Letter', which should be sent at public expense. Simply seal the envelope, write your name and 'Rule 39' on the back, and hand it in or post it in the box provided.

There is a good deal of variation in prison architecture, from the ancient cathedrals of human misery to the stark modern control-units. The accommodation parts of prisons are known as 'wings' or 'houseblocks', and they generally have cells on 'landings' or 'spurs' on more than one level, known as 'the ones', 'the twos' etc. Most modern prison cells are approximately 7ft x 11ft, but some are a good deal smaller, and in some prisons each cell may contain 2, or even 3, prisoners. Personally I am not prepared to share a space that small with another person, and if necessary will opt for a single cell in the block. Prisoners are having to spend more time locked in their cells than for many years, but you should not be 'banged up' for more than 23 hours at a time.

Prison really is a bizarre institution to come into, and it'll take you a while to get used to it. Humans are an adaptable species though, and within a few weeks you'll probably find you're cracking on like an old lag. If you're on remand though, this can be a time when you fuck up, and it's something I always warn people about. Time is different in jail, particularly when you're first locked up, a couple of days can seem like a month. It's a harsh environment, and you'll be spending a lot of time with the same people. Many of these will turn out to be good friends, but always try to bear in mind that in reality, you've known them for days or weeks, not years, and that not everyone in jail tells the truth about themselves. In particular, be wary about discussing the details of your case with those you hardly know, too many people wind up in court with former cell-mates giving evidence against them. Also be careful about giving out your home address or personal details until you know your new friends a lot better.

There are a thousand scams and tricks in jail, cons are extremely inventive

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT PRISONERS

ADOPT A PRISONER

If you're active in a group or campaign why not choose one or two prisoners to consistently support. Pass cards round meetings, send useful stuff, knock up a flyposter and get their case some publicity if they could use it, get in touch with the prisoner's support group if there is one. Of course you can take this on as an individual, too.

WRITING TO PRISONERS/SENDING THINGS

Prison is isolation, so contact with the outside world, letting a prisoner know s/he is not forgotten, helps break this down. Sometimes just a friendly card can boost their morale. Writing for the first time to a complete stranger can be awkward. A card with some well wishes, a bit about who you are and asking what you can do to help is often enough. Don't expect prisoners to write back. Sometimes, the number of letters they can receive/write is restricted, or they just might not be very good at writing back. To help, include a couple of stamps or, if writing abroad, International Reply Coupons (IRC's) that you can get from the post office. Write on clean paper and don't re-use envelopes. Remember a return address, also on the envelope. Ask what the prisoner can have sent to them, as this varies from prison to prison. Books and pamphlets usually have to be sent from a recognised distributor/bookshop/publisher (ask at a friendly bookshop). Tapes, videos, writing pads, zines, toiletries and postal orders are some of the things you might be able to send. Food just gets eaten by screws.

Remember that all letters are opened and looked through so don't write stuff that could endanger anyone - this doesn't mean you should be over paranoid and write one meaningless comment on the weather after the other. Be prepared to share a bit of your life to brighten up someone's on the inside. e.g. We received a letter from Herman Wallace, after sending him a card from the group.

He says-

"It is quite essential that I take out a moment to express my gratitude to all the wonderful folk who sent me so much love & support in this one card. I am really touched by the intensity of energy from this card and I just had to stand up from my seat and smile. Thank you. Right now, in spite of my repressive condition you guys have made me feel GREAT!"

PROTEST LETTERS

Petitioning Tony Blair asking him to stop being a capitalist bastard might well be futile. But writing letters to relevant places requesting something realistic such as an appeal, transfer, vegan food etc on behalf of a prisoner can help improve their chances. Prisoners who are seen to be 'in the public eye' do tend to be treated better.

OTHER SUPPORT

There is so much more than can be done, up to you and your imagination and your contact with a prisoner, such as: publicity for the case, visits, financial support, pickets of prisons...

Taken from the Brighton ABC website. Address on page 32

The night before we collect her I can't sleep, I'm nervous about her mental state, that jail may have damaged her. I'm thrilled to be seeing her. We set off early with badly but lovingly made banners, some stolen food, an incredible card signed by all those who had to go home. When finally I see her and hold her, I'm amazed by how well she seems. She tells us that she loved our noise demonstration, that it felt as if she was there at the carnival, she too was making noise, she too was dancing, she banged on her window so hard it broke. We had bought the carnival beyond the walls of the jail, we had reached her and connected. In those small moments, we had won.

She told us she felt so loved and close to us all, that she was less afraid of prison than she had before. Our support had kept her strong enough that she felt able to carry on resisting and risking. She was in prison but she was dancing with the rest of us. We'd defied their attempt to separate her, or for prison to dampen her rebellion.

Fifteen of us are in the Crown Prosecution Service building in Sheffield, searching for the files they've kept about Mark Barnsley. He wants them released and so do we. The staff are telling us we're not allowed to be there, we're trespassing. We're opening cupboards we're not meant to, the secret world of the courts that we are walking disrespectfully onto. We're only there temporarily, a short time, but for some moments we are in their space and not abiding by their rules, we are roaming freely. We get dragged out soon after, arrested and held for a few hours. we all give "no comment" interviews. They charge us with "conspiracy to commit burglary". But the Sheffield courts can't hear our case because they're the prosecutors so they send us to Hull instead. and eventually, unsurprisingly, they drop the charges.

I'm visiting someone in prison. It's the first time I've been in, the first time we've met. I'm nervous, it's like a blind date with none of the easy trappings. But we meet and hug and then we talk and we talk and we talk, and it isn't just "prisoner support", it's a friendship. I'm learning about life in prison, he teaches me some prison slang. The more I get to learn of prison the less alien it seems. It becomes to me a horrible normal place, not a horrible exotic one. These foreigners becoming people not prisoners, de-learning and rebuilding the constructs we have of convicts. It is really different to look forward to letters, to be communicating not out of duty, but from connection.

These feel like a crossing, from one place to another. I want to stress the sheer ordinariness of such things, but that, also, this does not make them unimportant or futile. Our connections and communications with prisoners should be full of meaning to us on the outside, not just letters of duty and responsibility, careless acts of charity. To act with thoughts of our freedom, with what we value and would miss. I dream of burning down Wandsworth prison, and to jail busts - when we turn up the heat perhaps we really can melt the bars. In the waking hours I am still in the small acts, and whilst these don't and can't destroy and mend, they are shards of natural light, stealing in and out like fugitives, crossing over borders we are forbidden to cross.

people and are always one step ahead of the screws. As you pick up your jail-craft you'll learn everything from how to pass a cigarette from one end of the wing to the other, how to make prison 'hooch' without yeast, how to make weapons out of next to nothing, how to defeat electronic door systems, how to make a cup of tea without a kettle, and all sorts of other survival skills. When you first get locked up, you'll doubt that you could last more than week in this environment, but in all likelihood you will, and will even share in the gallows humour endemic to this otherwise joyless existence.

The human spirit can flourish and triumph in the face of the darkest adversity, but I'm not going to tell you that prisons are anything other than utterly rotten places, particularly for those of us who have to endure year after year of long-term imprisonment. Prison kills you physically and psychologically, it's a living death, like being buried alive. I once read about a Native American woman who suddenly woke up from a coma as if from sleep. She wanted to know where her husband and her children were, but she'd been unconscious so long her husband had remarried and her children grown up. It's a tragic story, but at least she didn't have the slow torture of having to watch, helpless, as her life slipped away from her, together with everything she cared about. That's how it is for most long-term prisoners, and many lose their families, homes, jobs, savings, and possessions even before their cases come to trial. Hang onto your integrity, because when the System's finished with you and spits you back out on the street, it may be all you have left.

But hey, nobody said it was going to be easy, if it was easy they wouldn't call it 'struggle' would they? As political activists we're the lucky ones in here, given a rare opportunity to get inside the machine and act like a virus. As an activist you're not locked up to take a holiday, there's a real struggle to be fought in here, so keep militant and get involved.

Mark Barnsley,
6th March 2002,
Whitemoor Prison.
England.



Noise demonstration outside Wakefield prison. February 2001

Be free wherever you are!

Prison is one of the worst human inventions. It is an alienating place and negative experience (better not tried first hand!), it's anti-human - it intervenes or restricts every movement you make, every choice you could make, intercept the air you breathe, how much sky you can see ...

Losing one's liberty is indeed one of the most painful experiences and dear losses beside losing life. At least to me.

As well as robbing you of liberty, in prison you need to forget about privacy and things like proper rest. Your time and space are always interfered with or interrupted.

In the face of all this, one has to search for and dig deep in and hold tight and firm to your inner freedom and dignity. Nothing and no-one can take these away or compromise them no matter what. Respect yourself (and others) everywhere and always and everything will be better. Free your mind and spirit. Raise above and beyond your physical hardships and realities and a whole new world and possibilities open up. Always remember no-one can stop the time and just as you came in to prison your day to come out must and will come. Prison will only be a chapter in your life, and no matter how long and hard it is it's never all doom and gloom.

You will encounter lots of human mediocrity and wickedness, selfishness, greed, arrogance and pettiness. But there is also kindness, humour, some friendship, some humanity. No matter how bad are your conditions and treatment, don't let anyone take away your humanity.

Prison is a negative experience to be avoided! If you're in prison because of 'politics' then don't regret your commitment (but always review your actions!). Be prepared for a new struggle, new different serious sacrifices. No matter who you are there is a lot of daily 'wear and tear' and waste of energy and time. A lot of restrictions, crazy rules and contradictions etc. All the time something tests your patience or tolerance. Lots of frustrations, also lots of ignorance, cynicism and maybe some provocations if you're 'politically motivated'. But then you must 'fight back', learn to be patient, let go of a lot of worries, demands, expectations etc. Compromise but don't compromise yourself. Avoid unnecessary battles and arguments. Don't trust easily let go your guards except in the fewer cases. Defend yourself and answer back or fight them only on major important issues. Don't let the system wear you out of use what its strengths! We each have different circumstances and 'lines' to draw.

At the same time prison can be a positive experience, an opportunity to 'win' and 'grow' despite 'the costs'. As I said you can learn to be patient and tolerant, let go of a lot of worries. Learn about yourself and others. Reflect on your life, on the case, on your actions. Think about your future.

Learn/try new things or do things you've always wanted to do. Try to concentrate on what you can do rather than can't do. Develop your own mini routine or program, e.g. read 1 book this week or month, do cell work outs etc, try hobbies, writing, reading etc. Go to the gym, get fresh air when possible. Do something creative like art, craft, music or writing. Try to maintain health and mind. Maintain relations through phone, letters, visits, live mind. Altogether continue life through a different one. Never give up faith and hope. Enjoy the little things, maximise use of whatever is possible and available, but keep an eye out for changes for the better and remember there is a world much bigger than prison

Section 2 Prisoner Solidarity

NO BORDERS

At our optimum, our actions are not just for prisoner support but to defy all that prison is. Prison is the separation of the "free" outside and the caged inside. It is the control of everyday life. It is punishment and isolation. It is spirit breaking and confidence crushing. It is life by the clock, confinement in concrete. It is perhaps the furthest we can be taken from a natural state of being.

On the outside we are afraid of prison. Prison controls not just those within it's walls but all of us, by it's very existence. We are afraid of the loss of many things; freedom, spontaneity, true warm friendship, love, trees, sun...all that which is restricted on the outside is denied us entirely when in jail.

Just like the cops are in our heads and not just on the streets, there are bars in our minds as well as on the windows. Prison has a different language, culture, mental state. It is a different country. This gives us more to fight. This gives us more ground to fight on. At war with what prison does to it's inhabitants, we need to act on the outside *with*, not on *behalf* of those inside. We can cross such borders in endless ways, exchange pieces of that which we cherish. Here are a few of my experiences that seemed to me to pass through, overcome the physical, emotional, mental constraint of outside and inside.

I'm in Den Haag in Holland, outside the courts. A few of us are waiting for our friend to see if she will be taken to prison or released. The solicitor comes out and tells us she is being taken to prison until the climate change conference is over, and also that she is in a terrible depressed state.

We postpone our tickets home. We collect over 40 letters and postcards, send these into her. We stay awake late making flyers and banners for a noise demonstration, commonplace in mainland Europe. I happen to be in the legal office when she calls. I tell her we are coming, and she tells me where her cell is, which street to be on so she can see us. She sounds excited, and I am delighted to hear her voice.

150 of us are on the street by the prison, banging drums, some simple samba sounds, letting distress flares and fireworks off. There is fire-juggling and acrobatics, we are all dancing, people climbing up trees and waving to her window. We scream ourselves hoarse for an hour and a half. The Dutch tell us it is the biggest and longest noise demonstration the Netherlands have seen.